

**Article information**

Received: 15 February 2025

Reviewed: 18 February - 16 March 2025

Revision: 17 March - 25 March 2025

Accepted: 26 March 2025

Published: 10 April 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/ps.v23i1.77526>Available: <https://www.nepjol.info/index.php/ps>**Critique on Inert Objectification of Nature in Collins's *The Hunger Game***

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The paper critiques Capitol's perception of nature as an inert object as manipulated in the novel *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins. Set in the fictional setting of Panem, the story follows Katniss Everdeen, a 16-year-old girl who participates in the brutal game named as 'Hunger Games' conducted by the state to remind its citizens of the impact of resistance. The game 'fight to death' is annually conducted where one victor is declared after the death of twenty-three tributes. Drawing on the concept of nature as living organism as suggested by Carolyn Merchant, Steven Vogel, and Amitav Ghosh, the paper argues that nature is undefeatable, insurmountable, and indomitable. Merchant's worries about nature's objectification, Vogel's concern on dualism, and Ghosh's question to inert representation of nature serve the theoretical backup for the study. The paper concludes that the perception of nature as an inert object by the state is critiqued and challenged when the state fails to control its subjects and plants. It is implied that due to mother earth, the survival of ecological selves is possible at a time of hardship.

Keywords: Capitol, dualism, hunger games, nature

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Introduction

Nature is what ‘the earth is and does without human interference.’ It is defined as “free of humans” (Shiva, 2010, p. 15), “image of nature as garden” (Gifford, 2009, p. 33), “nature’s existence beyond ourselves (humans)” (Barry, 2017, p. 243), and acting on its own “without human intervention” (Kerridge, 2009, p. 538). Contemporarily, nature’s equivalence to arcadia sounds odd due to forced human encroachment into it. Perception of nature revolves around two images; one related to human-nature world, and another to wilderness uncroached by humanity. Scholars agree that nature is life-sustaining force, but they are worried about its severe exploitation in capitalistic mode of life.

The life-sustaining image of nature dominates the setting of the novel under scrutiny. Amidst poverty and starvation, the protagonist Katniss Everdeen goes to the woods to bring food stuffs to save her family. The novel highlights the life-sustaining trait of nature—traditionally associated with both feminine energy and the earth's abundance. However, trying to transform nature into an inert object where human manipulation is made possible with a click on computer suggests futility and loss, and symbolizes how modernization drains both citizens and natural resources. Katniss Everdeen’s struggle parallels the land's degradation caused by the state’s violation on it. As a child, her identity is deeply connected to the earth's life. The manipulation of nature by the state disrupts traditional surviving methods and simultaneously threatens both her way of life and the environment's health. The "boundary set for fighting" represents how traditional, sustainable relationships with the land slip away under anthropocentric perception of nature.

The Hunger Games is set in a future nation called Panem, where the Capitol rules over twelve districts. Once when the citizens revolt against its rule, they get killed. In memory of this event, the Capitol annually organizes the game in The Hunger Games—a televised fight to the death, where the state forces each district to send two tributes (one boy and one girl) to participate in the game. All the twenty-four tributes will fight till only one remains alive to be chosen the winner. The state has already controlled the citizens.

In the novel, Katniss Everdeen and her friend Gale sustain their families representing in an agrarian life. They see the hills, rocks overlooking valley, and berry bushes which help them forget the immediate effects of famine. Katniss states, “In the woods waits the only person with whom I can be myself. Gale. I can feel the muscles in my face relaxing, my pace quickening as I climb the hills to our place, a rock ledge overlooking a valley. A thicket of berry bushes protects it from unwanted eyes” (p. 7). It is foreshadowed in the beginning of the novel that nature cannot be overcome, either by individual or by the state. The rock, hills and berry, the reflection of powerful nature, are there forever irrespective of the state’s laws. The nature is bountiful in its characteristic representation.

Katniss’s attachment to woods reflects the theme of reliance of human on nature. After the famine hits the district twelve and the whole nation, it is woods that help her and her community survive. She mentions, “As soon as I’m in the trees, I retrieve a bow and sheath of arrows from a hollow log. Electrified or not, the fence has been successful at keeping the flesh-eaters out of District 12. Inside the woods they roam freely, and there are added concerns like venomous snakes, rabid animals, and no real paths to follow” (p. 6). Here, the state’s attempts to control woods fail as Katniss crosses the fence to woods even if they are electrified. Though, it is controlled by the state, nature in the form of woods constantly fulfills human needs. Thus, it is a source of livelihood and freedom to Katniss and other people. It means nature’s law is indifferent to human law. Amidst this context, the study proposes to solve these research questions: Is nature a thing to be conquered? How could Katniss and Preeta survive the harsh reality of artificially constructed adverse climatic condition in the arena? How does the powerful state surrender in covert way before these two characters? The study implies an assumption

that due to anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism, the state called 'Capitol' functions as almighty being, but it is in fragile situation due to the fact that nature cannot be subsumed and controlled. The better option for humanity is to live with nature as ecological beings.

Review of Literature

The novel *The Hunger Games* has received a number of critical observations after its publication in 2008. It has been interpreted as a dystopian novel by many scholars. Rania Abdel Meguid (2018) analyses the novel as dystopian and post-apocalyptic fiction that deals with the worst situation of people under the authoritarian control of the state called Capitol. Meguid asserts, "It has been argued that Collin's *The Hunger Games*, along with many other recent dystopian, post-apocalyptic works of art, serve as a warning of what our future in reality would be like should authoritarianism and totalitarianism remain unopposed" (p.159). Authoritarianism means strict obedience of people to the state, and totalitarianism is a system of government from centralized position. This novel, according to the quote, serves as a warning for the future in reality under authoritarianism and totalitarianism. He further argues, "The readers' ability to connect personally with Katniss and understand her feelings and thoughts seems to be of paramount importance as she is the best person to express her own feelings" (p. 160). Katniss's story is horrible where understanding her feelings and thoughts are appealing for any kind of readers. She expresses her own feelings and emotions through the narrative amidst the cruelty and harsh life. Meguid highlights the dystopian side of the novel creating a scary image of Panem of Capitol. Bringing the feelings of Katniss, he argues, "Living through her feelings and thoughts gives the readers the opportunity to experience what she has been living through, which adds to the horrific picture the novel is trying to create of the dystopian world of Panem" (p.160). The novel highlights that living in/through a scary image of Panem is difficult and dystopian. The dystopian nature of the state that keeps its subjects under the control creates havoc in the lives of characters. It also serves as a warning against allowing the establishment of a dystopia in the real world. Katniss's world is a horrible world created out of Capitol's intention of creating 'no-resistance' state thereby leading towards dystopia. It is dystopia due to the horrible game called the hunger game where people are taken as tributes to fight in the game. Meguid illustrates, "The tributes are later taken in a helicopter to the arena, which is located in large woods, where each of the tributes has to face death at the hands of their fellow tributes, the game keepers and the wild nature. The following extract is part of Katniss' account of the horrifying days she has spent in the woods" (p. 166). The tributes are taken or transferred to arena which is absolutely controlled by the state. The tributes have to face death at the hands of the fellow tributes. The game keepers are representative of the state and they are of the wild nature.

Similarly, Laine (2018) reads it as a novel of extreme fear. She argues, "This article studies the hugely popular and critically acclaimed *The Hunger Games* . . . Katniss Everdeen, who survives in a world in which fear is structural and mediated through visual technologies" (p. 17). Katniss's world is a world of fear. She lives with tortures and ills of the state. The resistance is sometimes seen in personal level: "In *The Hunger Games*, actual resistance becomes a matter of individual action only" (p. 17). The resistance is seen towards the end of the novel. The state is a panoptical one to have surveillance over the citizens. Laine further argues, "One of the most critical aspects of *The Hunger Games* is indeed the pervasive-ness and ubiquity of public screens that are seamlessly positioned within private and communal spaces, shaped by panoptic principles that delineate people's bodies as well as the way in which those bodies inhabit space" (p. 18). The private and communal spaces are watched by panoptic state that delineate people's bodies and freedom as well as the way in which those bodies are under attack due to the repressive ideology of the state. Laine further argues about the world of Panem where "Capitol's power is visibly omnipresent, and there is no way that its inhabitants can act freely of its constraints" (p. 19). In the state of Panem, the control is maintained by Peacekeepers often known as a

military police force. The state 'Capitol' is omnipresent. Its inhabitants are not free. The military police force called the Peacekeepers symbolizes authority, and they function as a highly noticeable reminder of the Capitol's cruelty.

Though the state has dominated its citizens through the controlling mechanism, it is not possible to control over the nature. The narrative, though, shows that the area is manipulated by the state, it is not controlled in underlying level. The atmosphere and climatic condition are changed and controlled artificially by the state. In this case, what triggers to carry out this research is a question whether nature can be conquered by the man-made laws. The research attempts to fulfill this gap.

Methodology

This is qualitative research based on interpretivism as philosophical strand. The methodology involved in this research is ecocriticism with textual analysis as a method which is done bringing evidence from the primary text under scrutiny and ideas from the secondary sources including theoretical and critical insights dominantly from scholars like Carolyn Merchant and Amitav Ghosh.

Merchant (1990) first discusses about the permanent feature associated with nature and worries how this image of nature as living organism gradually declines. She observes, "The image of the earth as a living organism and nurturing mother had served as a cultural constraint restricting the actions of human beings" (p. 3). The image of the earth as organism was under the shadow of cultural constraint of humanity though it used to limit human action in the ancient time. Thus, the concept, "Nature was replica of the cosmos" (p. 11) lose its central tenets at a time when science and technology replaced the innate and inherent features of nature. Merchant argues, "The living character of the world organism meant not only that the stars and planets were alive, but that the earth too was pervaded by a force giving life and motion to the living beings on it" (p. 23). The earth's life-giving force is so vehement that humanity cannot change its essence. Dominion over nature worries Merchant. She argues, "Disorderly, active nature was soon forced to submit to the questions and experimental techniques of the new science" (p. 164). The introduction of science functioned at the cost of damaging the inherent features of nature: "The development of science as a methodology for manipulating nature" (p. 186). Nature is manipulated after the introduction of science and technology in the ecology.

Bringing the reference of Merchant, Buell (1995) also talks about human's attempt to manipulate nature. He argues, "With the scientific revolution, nature changed, from an active teacher and parent into a mindless, submissive body in the hand of engineers of the modern word system, this is" (p. 215). The technological people intervene with nature. The nature-culture conflict is pervasive in the modern world. With this intervention, the real essence of nature disappears as Richard Kerridge (2009) suggests: "In its most familiar meaning, nature is what the earth is and does without human intervention" (p. 538). Kerridge views nature as pristine where there is no human encroachment. For him, the mediated environment is problematic: "The natural is opposite to the artificial" (p. 538). He contends that the subduedness of nature to meet human goals has limited the nature as resource.

Nature exists independently with diverse forms. Vogel (2008) sees nature as plural entity. He states, "The term nature can mean everything in the physical world, which is to say everything subject to physical/ chemical/biological processes; the contrast term to natural in this sense is supernatural, meaning that which somehow escapes those processes. But, on the other hand, natural can also mean that which occurs without any human intervention" (p. 156). The concept of nature as physical world is subject to physical, chemical, and biological processes. It exists without human intervention. The problem emerged after humans began to represent themselves as active agent over the nature. Vogel further argues, "To be human is to be active in the world—and to be active in it means, inevitably, to transform it, which in turn means that there is no ontological distinction between "city" and "country,"

between "social" and "natural"; there is only one working, in which humans are always already actively involved" (p. 159). This results in dualism where one is put at the top and the other at the bottom: "This is why dualism is wrong; humans cannot be separated from the world any more than the world can be separated from them" (p. 159). The dualism is wrong as it gives value to one over the other. Similar to it, Ghosh (2021) also argues that humanity tends to change the landscape for anthropocentric benefits. He notes, "Subduing this wild land meant changing it ecologically and remaking it" (p. 65), leading to ecological disturbance. He agrees, Earth is bountiful, and it is surrounded with a blessing to all ecological beings.

Nature's (Mis) Representation in *The Hunger Games*

Scholars contributing in the literary representation of nature have argued that nature is omnipotent and omniscient unlike the anthropocentric beliefs that devalue and underestimate it. Nature has existed before the evolution of human world. It is mysterious, life-giving and unpredictable with its own course of actions. Due to the incorporation of scientific and technological advancement into nature, the wilderness has diminished bringing death and famine as well as ecological imbalance.

Destruction of wilderness gradually affects humanity. This is seen in the novel, *The Hunger Games*, where the narrator, a 16-years-old girl, has to go to jungle to bring foodstuffs to the family. She feels her family is dying. Dying of hunger is more painful than a sudden death. Thus, the narrator prefers being dead by a bullet shot than living in hunger. She expresses this as, "Anyway, Gale and I agree that if we have to choose between dying of hunger and a bullet in the head, the bullet would be much quicker" (p. 18). The famine has made their lives harder. For them, the only way to survive the hunger is to enter the woods where life-sustaining force is innately visible. The novel revolves around the game popularly known as hunger games. Its rules are unusual. Collins mentions:

The rules of *The Hunger Games* are simple. In punishment for the uprising, each of the twelve districts must provide one girl and one boy, called tributes, to participate. The twenty-four tributes will be imprisoned in a vast outdoor arena that could hold anything from a burning desert to a frozen wasteland. Over a period of several weeks, the competitors must fight to the death. The last tribute standing wins. (p. 19)

The game resembles the features of dystopian world. The state called 'Capitol' has twelve districts. One boy and one girl from every district, known as tributes, must take part in the game either to 'kill' other or to be 'killed' by others. Out of twenty-four tributes, twenty-three are to be killed and the last survivor will be called winner. Fun at the cost of cruelty is poignant in the story. The narrator states, "Things have been too quiet today. No deaths, perhaps no fights at all. The audience in the Capitol will be getting bored, claiming that these Games are verging on dullness. This is the one thing the Games must not do" (p. 174). They want immediate deaths in the games. The tributes are taken to the arena where the game begins with its cruelty, inhumanity, and evils.

The tributes are forced to fight until their death in the controlled land called 'Areana.' The arena is controlled by the state, changing its geographical and topographical features. The state is fully convinced that it could control the nature. The dystopian world is depicted by the critic Marc DiPaolo (2018) who shows the similarity between *The Hunger Games* and Atwood's dystopian nature of world. He mentions, "In theory, fans of *The Hunger Games* should grow up able to appreciate Atwood's dystopian novels because of the thematic overlap between the narratives, although the difference in writing styles between Atwood and Suzanne Collins might prove a stumbling block" (p. 178). This highlights dystopian nature of *The Hunger Games*. The tributes's horrible situation in the area prove the dystopia where they become a mere puppet in the surveillance of the state.

The war, known as annual festival of nation, degrades citizens' rights. As the tributes begin the fight, some of them instantly get killed, on the first day. They team up to survive and win. Katniss stays

away from the blood bath scene as instructed by the instructor. “Stay alive,” says Haymitch” (p. 138). During the hardship in arena, they hide in the woods. For example, Katniss is on a tree surrounded by other tributes. Katniss drops a Tracker Jackers (genetically engineered wasps) nest on the tributes. They also survive with the natural resources like foods, water stored in Cornucopia which means: “. . . a giant golden horn shaped like a cone with a curved tail, the mouth of which is at least twenty feet high, spilling over with the things that will give us life here in the arena. Food, containers of water, weapons, medicine, garments, fire tarters” (p. 147). Cornucopia, a reflection of nature, is a giant golden horn shaped like a cone with a curved tail, gives them life in the arena.

Things in the arena are strange to Katniss. The woods are unfamiliar in comparison to her village woods. The stream following there is controlled by the state. The woods are shaped and reshaped. Collins writes, “The woods begin to evolve, and the pines are intermixed with a variety of trees, some I recognize, some completely foreign to me” (p. 151). Katniss is surprised to see the changes in the normal trees. She further narrates:

At one point, I hear a noise and pull my knife, thinking I may have to defend myself, but I’ve only startled a rabbit. “Good to see you,” I whisper. If there’s one rabbit, there could be hundreds just waiting to be snared. The ground slopes down. I don’t particularly like this. Valleys make me feel trapped. I want to be high, like in the hills around District 12, where I can see my enemies approaching. But I have no choice but to keep going. (p. 151)

Katniss learns that the arena and its area is controlled by the state. She needs to defend herself in the alien land. One rabbit is seen indicating the creation of other rabbits in artificial manner. It is where the question whether human can outsmart nature appears. In this regards, Amitav Ghosh (2021) also argues that “nature is seen as subdued and cheap” (p. 73) due to the frame of world-as-resource. Ghosh claims that “Earth could and did speak” (p. 51) indicating human foolishness to claim dominion over nature.

Katniss is almost lost in the mediated environment. She observes the berries she finds on the way as: “It’s late afternoon when I think I’ve found help. I spot a cluster of berry bushes and hurry to strip the fruit, to suck the sweet juices from the skins. But just as I’m holding them to my lips” (165). Not being sure if they are real or artificially created to poison her, she looks it carefully. Collins describes narrator’s feelings in these words: “I get a hard look at them. What I thought were blueberries have a slightly different shape, and when I break one open the insides are bloodred” (p. 165). The narrator further expresses, “I don’t recognize these berries, perhaps they are edible, but I’m guessing this is some evil trick on the part of the Gamemakers. Even the plant instructor in the Training Center made a point of telling us to avoid berries unless you were 100 percent sure they weren’t toxic” (p. 165). The berries Katniss again finds are toxic. She gets a hard look at them before she tastes them. She thought that these blueberries have a slightly different shape. To be sure, she breaks one berry, she finds it is bloodred. She doesn’t recognize these berries. She is sure that they are not edible. Thus, she avoids berries unless she is 100 percent sure they are not toxic and poisonous. She has to be careful of genetically created animals called mutations. Collins mentions:

Mutations. No question about it. I’ve never seen these mutts, but they’re no natural-born animals. They resemble huge wolves, but what wolf lands and then balances easily on its hind legs? What wolf waves the rest of the pack forward with its front paw as though it had a wrist? These things I can see at a distance. Up close, I’m sure their more menacing attributes will be revealed. (p. 326)

When the mutts appear, Katniss is surprised to see the modified animals. The mutts are not normal creatures. They are similar to huge wolves. She is frustrated to see the alternation in nature. However, the state is not successful to control the essence of nature. The control over nature by the state is full of

irony. The transformed landscape and animals hint the incorporation of scientific world into nature as suggested by Carolyn Merchant. Due to the scientific inquiry, the earth is losing its pure essence.

The arena is controlled and watched by the state enjoying the deaths of tributes. The fire spreads like wind due to the modern technology of the state. The narrator in the story of Collins mentions, "There is the Career pack and then there are the rest of us, probably spread far and thin across the arena. This fire is designed to flush us out, to drive us together. It may not be the most original device I've seen, but it's very, very effective" (p.172). The gamemaker uses the extreme form of artificially constructed fire to control arena and tributes fighting there. Katniss further shares her experiences as: "The flames that bear down on me have an unnatural height, a uniformity that marks them as human-made, machine-made, Gamemaker-made" (p. 172). The fire is machine-made to create fear on tributes and fun on the side of state and gamemaker. After this, the game-makers send cold wind, an infusion of frozen air in the arena. She narrates, "So cold, so bitterly cold tonight. As if the Gamemakers have sent an infusion of frozen air across the arena, which may be exactly what they've done" (p. 275), indicating the control over ecology. However, the air, in its true form, cannot be controlled. In this regards, Lawrence Buell shows a beautiful and vehement depiction of air bringing the reference of Wallace Stevens's poem "Credences of Summer." The first two lines of poem, "Air is Air- its vacancy glitters round us everywhere (p. 181)" indicates the omniscience and omnipotence of seemingly invisible air.

According to the rule of game, only one victor has to be declared. In the novel, Katniss learns this, "If Peeta and I were both to die, or they thought we were ...My fingers fumble with the pouch on my belt, freeing it. Peeta sees it and his hand clamps on my wrist: "No, I won't let you" (p. 339). They make plan to eat the berries that the state cannot control: "He holds my gaze for a long moment then lets me go. I loosen the top of the pouch and pour a few spoonfuls of berries into his palm. Then I fill my own— On the count of three? Peeta leans down and kisses me once, very gently. 'The count of three,' he says. We stand, our backs pressed together, our empty hands locked tight" (p. 339). If they die, the state will be a failure because the game ends without declaring any victor. Collins further talks about the narrator's feelings as: "I spread out my fingers, and the dark berries glisten in the sun. . . I lift my hand to my mouth, taking one last look at the world. The berries have just passed my lips when the trumpets begin to blare" (p. 339). Katniss stops Peeta from harming himself. They plan to eat poisonous berries to end their lives on the count of three. This is where the state fails to control the nature. It could not control the poisonous berries. Peeta wants to end his life so that Katniss can be the victor. In this case, Capitol is challenged by them. Unlike Capitol's assumption of Arena, it is a place where "Contact with Other" is established. The isolation between districts that the Capitol enforces is disrupted indicating the theme that nature cannot be manipulated by humans. Their easy return to their district indicates the gradual downfall of the state thereby showing the power of nature. It means those who adhere to nature with respect to it live an ecological life.

Thus, Katniss's covering of Prim's body with flowers is beyond the law of the state which is natural for her and Prim. She violates the rule established by Panem. Similarly, Panem could not control the plants like the berries with poisonous elements which Katniss uses to defy the rule. Had she taken the poison there would have been no one to declare a winner which is against the system of Panem. When she is about to eat the poisonous berries, Claudius Templesmith asks them to stop and announces them as victors. They are airlifted from the arena. They are crowned. When interviewed by Caesar Flickerman, they say they have tried to end their lives because they cannot live in the absence of the other. They return to district twelve.

Conclusion

The failure of the state to control its subjects and berries supports the claim that nature cannot be defeated. The adherence of Katniss and Prea to nature is the essence of life philosophy that can even defeat the most powerful authority of Panem—the Capitol. These two characters do not only survive and return to their district, but also alter the state's power, and further plant the seed of overt and covert resistance to the brutal state. The survival of the characters would have been impossible had there not been existence of nature's inherent worth before the artificial nature or mediated environment. Since, nature cannot be defeated, this has made Katniss and Prea's survival possible irrespective of artificial weather, climatic condition, flooding which represent science and technology. Thus, the paper critiques Capitol's misrepresentation of nature as an inert object. The paper concludes that nature is undefeatable, insurmountable and indomitable. Nature's objectification is the result of value dualism and anthropocentrism. The perception of nature as inert object by the state is critiqued and challenged when the state fails to control its subjects and natural fruits like berries.

Ethical approval for the research: Not applicable

Consent for publication: Not applicable

Conflict of interest: The author does not have any conflict of interest with any institutions concerning this research

Ethical conduct of research: This paper is written ethically

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